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Abstract Realo (2003) raises the interesting point that the opinions about a culture by culture 'experts' may or may not correspond to the beliefs about that same culture held by people of that culture. In this commentary I argue that the discrepancy between consensual- and individual-level cultures is itself an important aspect of culture that has heretofore not received the recognition it deserves.

Key Words culture, discrepancy, individualism and collectivism, values

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The Discrepancy between Consensual-Level Culture and Individual-Level Culture

Realo (2003) raises the interesting point that the opinions about a culture by 'experts' may or may not correspond to the beliefs about that same culture held by people native to it. Quite frankly, I am not an expert on Estonia and thus cannot comment on the validity of the content Realo presents with regard to Estonian individualism versus collectivism. While I could comment on the quality of the methods and discuss how I think the study could have been strengthened (e.g. larger sample size and multiple methods in Study 2, cross-tabulation of different data in Study 2, the need for confirmation data on the contents of Table 1, and the like), instead I focus my comments here on the larger issues Realo raises with regard to the questioning of an 'expert' consensus of the composition of a cultural group. In particular, I will discuss two issues: the discrepancy between consensual- and individual-level cultures; and the relationship between consensual-level culture and individual-level measurements of culture.

The Discrepancy between Consensual-Level Culture and Individual-Level Culture

It is not surprising that a group of cultural experts, many of whom may or may not be familiar or intimate with Estonia, may characterize

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Estonian culture differently than Estonians see themselves and their culture, especially given the fact that the Estonians see themselves with greater diversity and individual differences than do 'outsiders'. People have a tendency to perceive their own ingroup as heterogeneous, fully recognizing the individual differences that exist in that group, while they perceive other groups as more homogeneous, assuming less diversity within the group (Linville & Jones, 1980; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). At least some of the findings that Realo reports may be related to this difference in perceptions of self- versus other-groups.

Regardless of the degree to which the data can be accounted for by such perceptual tendencies, however, Realo raises an interesting and important point with regard to our understanding of culture that has been little examined heretofore: the possible discrepancy between culture-level consensus about a culture and the reality within the culture on the level of individual values, behaviors, opinions, beliefs and attitudes. While Realo uses this discrepancy as a platform to call for the examination of the 'core' elements of individualism and collectivism that are inherent in both cultural- and individual-level characterizations of culture, there is another point to be made: that the discrepancy itself is an important aspect of culture.

Characterizations of many cultures originate not from the masses of individuals who are members of the culture, but rather from a smaller group of the cultural elite who define the culture for the masses. For instance, culture is often characterized by government officials, literary and non-literary authors, religious groups and leaders, academics, media and news, and the like, who define their culture in their writing and words. These cultural characterizations are then promulgated to the people who comprise those cultures, and those characterizations then become common knowledge. This top-down depiction of cultural construction is complemented by bottom-up transmission as well, which has its own characteristics. As diverse concepts ascend the categorical hierarchy, creating superordinate categories, only their most salient points are extracted and much of the diversity of the category is lost. Thus the 'culture' of a group of people is the consensual characterization of the group's attitudes, values, beliefs, opinions, behaviors and norms that is constructed through a reciprocal process of top-down and bottom-up influence.

But consensual, group-level culture, even when constructed in this dynamic fashion, will never capture the individual variations on cultural themes that inevitably exist in the culture. Discrepancies between consensual-level culture and individual-level variations on cultural themes themselves are, in fact, inevitable. Every culture will

therefore have to deal with these discrepancies somehow, and consequently the attitudes, values and opinions of the group as a whole toward the discrepancy itself become a major part of culture.

For example, in the US, as Realo mentions, there is culture-level consensus on the dimension of egalitarianism. Real life in the US for many people, however, is not very egalitarian. In fact there are great discrepancies between this value as a cultural consensus and reality in the lives of the members who live in that culture. American culture deals with this discrepancy by creating a certain degree of tolerance and even pride in it, and this tolerance for discrepancy is something that defines this culture.

Or take another country and culture that I am somewhat familiar with—Japan. The consensual level of culture that is ‘known’ about Japan is that it is very collectivistic, oriented around group harmony, cohesion and cooperation; and hierarchical, organized around obedience and deference to status differences. This consensus of Japanese culture is shared alike by Japanese and non-Japanese, laypersons and scholars. Yet when values, attitudes, beliefs, opinions and behaviors of individual Japanese persons are examined, the data indicate quite conclusively that there is a great discrepancy between the cultural consensus and reality (Matsumoto, 2002; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). Moreover, in the Japanese case this discrepancy is much less tolerated than in the American case, which leads, I believe, to considerable social strife in that country (increasing juvenile delinquency, school dropout rates, bullying, etc.).

In the past few decades the field of cross-cultural psychology has been witness to a number of important traditions in the understanding of culture. The dimensional approach, which had its springboard with Hofstede’s (1980, 1984) and then Triandis’s (1972, 1994, 1995) works, certainly represents one such tradition. Another tradition focusing on cultural values was brought to prominence by Schwartz (1994; Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). These traditions, and the studies and theories they have fostered, certainly tell us something important about cultures. What I am suggesting here, however, is that there is something else to culture, something heretofore not given much consideration or attention in the literature—that the discrepancy between consensual- and individual-level culture, and the attitudes, values, beliefs and opinions about that discrepancy—is itself an important part of culture that deserves conceptual and empirical consideration.

To some degree these comments are related to Pelto’s (1968) distinction of the tightness or looseness of societies. But there are important differences. Pelto focused mainly on the degree of homo- or

heterogeneity within cultures, and this can clearly be linked to smaller or larger discrepancies between consensual- and individual-level cultures. However, the issue I raise here is that the attitudes and values concerning that homo- or heterogeneity, which may be represented by Pelto's distinctions, are an important aspect of culture. Thus we need to take Pelto's distinctions a step or two further than he intended.

Consensual- versus Individual-Level Measurements of Culture

Realo's paper and the comments above also raise questions about the difference between consensual-level culture and individual-level measurements of culture. In the past two decades the field has been witness to an explosion of techniques designed to measure cultural dimensions or values on the individual level. Triandis's measures of individualism and collectivism (IC) are by far the most widely used tests of this cultural dimension on the individual level, including those related to his more recent conceptual formulations of horizontal and vertical IC (Triandis, 1995; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Several derivatives of individual IC measures exist, including Hui's (1988) INDCOL, Yamaguchi's (1994) collectivism scale and Matsumoto's context-specific scale (Matsumoto, Weissman, Preston, Brown, & Kupperbusch, 1997). Matsumoto has also used a scale to measure individual-level differences in status differentiation, a concept related to Hofstede's dimension of power distance (Matsumoto et al., 2002). Schwartz's (1999) value scales can measure both individual- and culture-level values. Scales related to independent and interdependent self-construals, most notably those created by Singelis (1994) based on the concepts forwarded by Markus and Kitayama (1991), are also widely used.

In the past, researchers, myself included, have done a poor job of noting the difference between consensual-level culture and individual-level measurements of culture (see also discussion by Smith & Schwartz, 1997). More often than not, researchers have equated the two, suggesting or implying that their individual-level measurements of culture are in fact representative of group- and consensual-level culture. Quite frankly, they are not—or, more precisely, not completely. While there is some overlap among the factors that comprise individual- and consensual-level cultures, there are some clear differences, especially in relation to the roles played by social history, government, politics and the law, geography and climate, and socioeconomics in the production of individual- and national-level cultures. Exactly how much of group, consensual-level culture is 'captured' by individual-level assessments is

not known, because there has never been a study, to my knowledge, that actually examines the degree of overlap between the two, precisely because we have no ways of measuring all of the social and macro forces that form consensual-level culture. Part of the intent of my comments on Realo's paper, therefore, is to urge for greater consideration of these issues and development of such methods in order to flesh out these important questions. In the meantime it is probably best not to simply equate macro-level culture with individual-level measurements of cultural dimensions, values or self-construals.

Conclusion

The study of the discrepancy between consensual- and individual-level culture is valuable in all cultures, but especially in those cultures undergoing massive social and cultural changes, such as those recovering from wars (e.g. Japan, Korea) or changes in sociopolitics (e.g. Germany, many countries in eastern Europe). Discrepancies between consensual- and individual-level cultures have major ramifications for identity issues and mental and physical health, and must surely be tied to government/politics and economics. These discrepancies deserve greater attention as an important aspect of culture in their own right, and raise important questions about the meaning of individual-level measures of cultural dimensions or values.

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Biography

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